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Husbandry of Power

By Chalmers M. Roberts
Washington Post Staff Writer

ROGER HILSMAN, a tough-minded West Pointer and World War II guerrilla fighter, has given us another of the instant histories of the Kennedy years. His meteoric career ended with the assassination and he too has departed. But he has left us some tracks in the sands which are indeed worth retracing for what they tell us about the late President and, in a larger sense, about the American Government.

Hilsman served as director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research and then as assistant secretary for the Far East. His background was in Asia, his interest was in Asia and it is of Asia that he is here chiefly concerned.

His hero was, and remains, John F. Kennedy though on occasion he can find a fault. Hilsman was one of those activists who appealed to Kennedy and the President called on him outside his normal responsibilities. Hardly a respector of bureaucratic lines, Hilsman fully responded and as a result the establishment in both State and the Pentagon came at the least to dislike him. When Lyndon Johnson came to power and reverted to the more conventional modes of business, Hilsman was wise enough to quit before being booted out.

YET HILSMAN'S story, despite his praise for Kennedy's "statecraft," illuminates as well as do any of the other Kennedy era histories the cautions and restraints of the President. Hilsman does not say so but once again it is evident how carefully Kennedy husbanded the presidential power he so narrowly won. Once again we are reminded of the tragic loss of a second Kennedy Administration, perhaps more strongly based by choice of the electorate.

Because the war in Vietnam continues, Hilsman's chapters on that conflict are perhaps his most fascinating. It is his thesis that Kennedy took no irrevocable plunge; that the plunge was Mr. Johnson's doing. Yet his account develops the tragedy of the Vietnam war—a maelstrom into which the United States descended not by clear or determined decision but by default of understanding and continual compromise of choice.

Says Hilsman: "If Vietnam does represent a failure in the Kennedy Administration, it was a failure in implementation. A strategic concept of great promise for meeting guerrilla warfare was developed under President Kennedy . . ."

IN FACT, Hilsman means that he had a concept and that he thought he had sold it to the President. But instead of putting the blame on Kennedy, Hilsman hangs it on Defense Secretary McNamara, Gen. Wheeler and the other members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Secretary of State Rusk, Gen. Taylor at home and Gen. Harkins in Saigon. And such arguing doesn't really work, because it requires a vacillating President unwilling or unable to stand up to his own subordinates.

Book Review

'To Move a Nation'

By Roger Hilsman Doubleday, 602 pp., $6.95

In a sense, Hilsman's account of McNamara on Vietnam is the most fascinating part of his book. He depicts the Defense Secretary, despite his statistical bias and fondness for personal visits to Saigon to "get the facts," as a halfway convert to the Hilsman's thesis that the way to fight a guerrilla war is with guerrilla tactics, not with vast armies and artillery and bombing raids in both North and South Vietnam.

McNAMARA and Taylor, he writes, "had come a long way in recognizing that political factors were more important in Vietnam than they had been willing to admit" at first "but they had not come far enough to recognize that political factors were fundamental and overriding." In short, they were caught up in the military machine both had so effectively bucked on many occasions and were taken in by phony figures that "proved" how well the war was going.

Hilsman tells a strange tale of the last moments of the Diem Nhu regime in Saigon. McNamara and the Joint Chiefs, he recounts, would agree to a policy of "pressure and persuasion" on Diem and Nhu "only if the White House and the State Department would in turn agree to a public announcement that the Pentagon was right about how the 'shooting war' had been going." That compromise, says Hilsman produced McNamara's absurb and much ridiculed statement late in 1963 that "the major part of the United States military task can be completed by the end of 1965 . . ."

If true, the story hardly backs up Hilsman's contention that all might well have turned out differently if Kennedy had lived. It might have, but Hilsman hardly demonstrates it.

But Roger Hilsman is a man of both keen intellect and contagious fervor. His analyses of many of the world's problems will stand the test of time. His accounts of the Cuban missile crisis, of the Vietnam infighting, of the struggle over what to do about Laos, of the function of intelligence and the problem of policy-making in a democracy makes this a worthy book. The unhappy fact is that such a useful man, like the President he admitted, so quickly disappeared from the seats of power.